



March 1, 2008

Free Lunch Isn't Cool, So Some Students Go Hungry

By CAROL POGASH

SAN FRANCISCO — Although Francisco Velazquez, a 14-year-old freshman with spiky hair and sunglasses, qualifies for a free lunch at Balboa High School here, he was not eating.

He scanned the picnic table full of his friends in a school courtyard one day a few weeks ago, and said, “I’m not hungry.”

On another day, a group of classmates who also qualify for federally subsidized lunches sat on a bench. One ate a slice of pizza from the line where students pay for food; the rest went without.

Lunchtime “is the best time to impress your peers,” said Lewis Geist, a senior at Balboa and its student body president. Being seen with a subsidized meal, he said, “lowers your status.”

San Francisco school officials are looking at ways to encourage more poor students to accept government-financed meals, including the possibility of introducing cashless cafeterias where all students are offered the same food choices and use debit cards or punch in codes on a keypad so that all students check out at the cashier in the same manner.

Only 37 percent of eligible high school students citywide take advantage of the subsidized meal program. But the stigma of accepting a government lunch, while others are paying for food from a different menu, is not unique to San Francisco. It is a problem many school districts across the country have been quietly confronting with mixed results, education and school nutrition officials said.

“We all struggle with it one way or another,” said Eric Goldstein, chief executive of school support services for New York City’s public schools, where 860,000 free or subsidized meals are served daily.

The New York schools conduct regular promotions, including inviting players from the Mets, Giants and the Jets — and high school football players and girls’ softball players — to eat the subsidized fare in their jerseys.

Ann Cooper, director of nutrition services for the public schools in Berkeley, Calif., said that attention to school cafeterias had traditionally focused on nutrition, but that the separation of students who pay and those who receive free meals was an important “social justice issue.”

“Fewer people know about it,” said Ms. Cooper, whose lunch program offers the same food to students who pay and those who have subsidized meals.

Many districts have a dual system like the one at Balboa: one line, in the cafeteria, for government-subsidized meals (also available to students who pay) and another line for mostly snacks and fast-food for

students with cash, in another room, down the hall and around the corner. Most of the separation came into being in response to a federal requirement that food of minimal nutritional value not be sold in the same place as subsidized meals — which have to meet certain nutritional standards.

But in part because of the fallout from having separate lines, some districts have eliminated à la carte foods, and many have gone the debit-card route.

Mary Hill, president of the School Nutrition Association, a national group of school food providers, said students who receive free meals were “very sensitive” about being singled out.

“We want their participation so it’s important for us to deal with the stigma,” said Ms. Hill, who is also executive director of food services for the public schools in Jackson, Miss., where students who pay are required to buy the subsidized meal before they are allowed to buy à la carte items.

Federal school lunch programs began during the Great Depression to assist desperate farmers. By 1946, the National School Lunch Act was passed “to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children,” a concern that arose after many Army recruits during World War II were found to be malnourished.

Today, the [United States Department of Agriculture](#) spends \$8.3 billion a year to provide free and reduced-priced lunches for 30.6 million children whose families are at or below 130 percent of the national poverty level, about \$26,845 for a family of four. The program also provides reduced-priced meals for students who are between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level, or \$38,203 for a family of four.

Some schools use money raised from à la carte foods to support their subsidized lunch program, often adding choices to the federally financed menu. A [Government Accountability Office](#) report found that 90 percent of public schools in 2004 sold à la carte foods. While many have quit selling sodas and sweets, the separate lines remain.

“Anywhere you sell à la carte foods, that automatically means kids who can’t afford to purchase them are being identified,” said Kate Adamick, a lawyer, chef and food systems consultant based in New York.

Most elementary-school children like free lunches, school officials say, but by the time they enter middle school, social status intervenes. And at lunchtime, as students choose with whom to associate, many students from poor families either pay cash or go hungry if they do not bring lunches from home.

“I know kids need to eat but they don’t want to be identified with free food,” said Kenneth Block, a track coach and security guard who oversees the lunch shift at Balboa High.

Attention to the matter in San Francisco came almost by chance.

Last year, Dr. Rajiv Bhatia, director of occupational and environmental health for the San Francisco Department of Public Health, was campaigning to improve the nutritional value of food in schools when he encountered the two-tier system.

Dr. Bhatia grew up in Oklahoma City, where he said he experienced and observed discrimination in the

public schools, including students hurling insults at his Indian heritage. He said he was shocked to find that students in San Francisco were facing similar challenges in the lunch line.

“Here in San Francisco, which has such a commitment to equality, this kind of segregation is occurring very blatantly,” Dr. Bhatia said. “Good and committed people trying to improve student food were blind to it.”

Dr. Bhatia said he decided that “somebody has to speak up,” and began pressing the school district to make changes. “There were feasible alternatives,” he said.

Dr. Bhatia proposes giving the same food to all students and having them pay with debit cards, a change that could cost the school district an estimated \$1 million.

Colleen Kavanagh, executive director of Campaign for Better Nutrition, a local nonprofit group, joined Dr. Bhatia’s campaign and tried to make a legal case against the current system. She sought help from Public Advocates, a law firm in San Francisco. They determined that the city’s school cafeteria practices resulted in “overt identification and physical segregation” of students and appeared to violate state and federal laws.

The National School Lunch Act prohibits the segregating of students, “or any overt identification of any child.”

Nancy Montanez Johner, the under secretary for food, nutrition and consumer services for the Department of Agriculture, described the legal claims against the San Francisco system as “unfounded.”

Ms. Johner said that she had looked into the lunch programs here and determined that there was “no overt identification” because students were allowed to use any line they pleased and the schools did not post signs identifying the lines as free or paying.

But Carlos Garcia, San Francisco’s superintendent of schools since July, said the system needed to change. The separate lunch lines should be combined, Mr. Garcia said, and, despite cutbacks in school financing from the state, the district should spend the money to wire its cafeterias to accept debit cards.

“We have a problem here,” Mr. Garcia said. “We need to fix it.”

Mr. Geist, the Balboa High student president, does not qualify for a subsidized meal. But he said he was struck by how many of his Hispanic and African-American friends who could benefit from the program avoid it. It “is meant to help them,” Mr. Geist said.

At Balboa High and other schools, students and officials say, one group has fewer problems accepting free food: foreign-born students. At noon one day at Balboa, bubbly teenagers from Thailand, India, Myanmar and Hong Kong (as well as a table of girls who identified themselves as “ABC’s,” or American-Born Chinese) ate chicken teriyaki in the cafeteria and said they appreciated the free lunch.

Sitting with a friend from Myanmar, Amruta Bhavsar, a senior from India, said she felt no stigma.

“It doesn’t really matter,” she said. “The food is good.”

Down the hall and around the corner in another room the school sells an à la carte menu of pizza, turkey sandwiches, Caesar salad wraps and cookies to students who pay.

In New York, Mr. Goldstein said he also found that recent immigrants — including students from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Central America, Russia and China — relished the free meals.

To lure other students, Mr. Goldstein and his staff members engage in micromarketing by, for example, offering more vegetable dishes in Pakistani neighborhoods. Yet even with the efforts, Mr. Goldstein estimates that only 40 percent of eligible high school students citywide participate in New York's program.

Mr. Goldstein said he believed more eligible students would eat if all school cafeterias offered free meals to everyone, regardless of economic status, but that is generally too expensive. In New York, some schools offer free meals to everyone, he said, but the program runs a \$35 million deficit.

Mr. Geist, the Balboa senior, said the problem boiled down to an issue of fitting in.

“Kids who wear nice shoes and nice clothes,” he said, “don't want to be associated with food that says ‘I'm not able to provide for myself.’ ”

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